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My Guiding Vocal Pedagogical Principles

Adapted from Helen Hodam, member of the NEC voice faculty from 1977 – 2004

1. Posture
   Correct posture is of the utmost importance because of the breathing apparatus and muscles involved (the correct "singing posture").

   a. Requirements for Good Posture
      i. Must permit proper and relaxed breathing.
      ii. Good appearance – the singer should look in the mirror and ask, "Would I pay money to look at that?"
      iii. Must be an easy, but not completely relaxed (floppy) position. Be erect but not stiff – the key is elasticity.
      iv. Must be able to be maintained for long periods without fatigue.
      v. Must permit free and uninhibited movement of the body.
      vi. Must create a feeling of security and stability.

   b. Principles of Good Posture: Your Singing Position
      i. Weight is mainly on the balls of the feet. Some singers prefer weight on entire foot. It is effective if it gives added security and weight is not swung back on heels (not good for stage movement).
      ii. Knees must not be stiff.
      iii. There is a slight forward swing of the pelvis – buttocks in, stomach in. "Pull up your dining room and pinch in your sitting room."
      iv. The body above you hip bones should have feeling of "up and out" – a feeling of buoyancy.
      v. Chest floats comfortably high.
      vi. Relaxed hands and arms.
      vii. Shoulders are relaxed, not pulled up or bent forward.
      viii. Head is comfortably balanced – no tension in neck muscles.
      ix. Don't stick the chin out.
      x. Posture applies to either standing or sitting.

   c. Exercises for Posture
      i. Raise arms, keep position.
      ii. Walk, keeping posture.
      iii. Swing arms, keep position.
      iv. Swing arms circularly, rise on toes, keep position.
      v. Assume dancing position; entire torso up and out; up and down on balls of feet to feel buoyancy.
      vi. Think of yourself as a marionette with one string attached to the top of your head and one to your breastbone.

2. Breathing
    a. Breathing Apparatus
        i. Lungs – Two spongy bodies (bellows) in the cage-like framework of ribs, which are attached to the spine in the back and to the breastbone in the front. Lungs extend from slightly above collarbone level down to the diaphragm. Lung surface is immense and full capacity is rarely used or needed.
        ii. Ribs and Intercostal Muscles – Ribs protect the lungs and intercostal muscles pass between successive pairs of ribs on each side. These muscles control the movement of the ribs and enlargement of chest and, thus, are involved in your breathing.
        iii. Diaphragm – A large muscular partition (membrane), it separates the chest cavity from the abdomen. It is attached to the lower ribs and controls inhalation and exhalation. It falls or flattens upon inhalation and rises with exhalation.
        The diaphragm has a coordinating role. Real power is in the upper abdominal and epigastric-umbillical region. The meaning of the phrase "singing from the diaphragm" is to start the breath from below and not from the chest. Singer feels "in and out" more than fall and rise.
        There is some expansion and inhalation, but its primary function is to powerfully support muscles in exhalation in combination with intercostal muscles. It is used particularly in sustaining, for power and supporting sustained high notes. The top of abdomen must be relaxed to make way for downward swing of diaphragm. No "knotting" or grabbing of abdomen.

    All these must be coordinated for proper, relaxed breathing.

3. Inhalation
    a. There must be a feeling of relaxation in the throat, lower part of face and around the mouth.
    b. All-around comfortable expansion of back, sides and front. Ribs and chest expand, with slight upward and forward movement of the chest. The amount of air needed is relative to the length of phrases, but singers should always be in the correct position to take such a breath. For a short phrase, only a low, easy, quick breath is necessary. In practicing breathing exercises, always use practice expansive inhalation.
    c. Inhalation – "in, down and out"
    d. Inhale quietly through the mouth. During long rests or interludes or at the beginning of the piece, inhalation through nose is possible and often helps to get a relaxed, all-around inhalation.

4. Proper Inhalation and Open Throat
    a. Open throat is space, a process of getting everything out of the way. This is achieved through the intake of air – the relaxed, proper inhalation. The larynx goes down (it should never be forced or held down), giving the

feeling of the beginning of a yawn, a feeling of surprise, a silent pant (raising the soft palate). When breathing through the nose, there should be a feeling of sniffing or smelling.

b. Open throat has opening in both directions – lengthwise and across. The feeling of space inside the nasopharynx region combines with a feeling of relaxation in throat area and lower part of the face with relaxed lips.
c. When inhaling, get rid of old air. Breathe quietly with no jerking of the head – do not gasp. Inhaling must be rhythmic and should never become an automatic body movement.
d. Feeling of comfortable side and all-around expansion. Don't hold ribs in or press; never tighten or make ribcage rigid. There is always a feeling of flexibility, elasticity and vitality.
e. Never deliberately hold the throat open. It remains open with the flow of breath and maintenance of the vowel.
f. Think of space as energy and breath as energy. Think of breath as moving, as being controlled, concentrated, but not held. Think of release, flow of breath as spontaneity of breath. Never use breath as a weight. It is not the amount of breath but what you do with it, how you use it – breath management.
g. Abdominal muscles – Feeling should be that of inflating a rubber life preserver and sitting on it. This area is also called "belt" and "band" of muscles at the waistline – the upper abdominal muscles. They are not involved in inhaling, but in supporting, when needed.
h. Remember that the ribs have power to expand forward, sideways and backwards.
i. Maintenance of breathing position. The goal in singing is to keep the feeling after inhalation – a comfortable expanded feeling – while at the same time releasing breath into a vowel. Strengthening of muscles, proper management of breath in producing tone and connecting breath with vowel and pitch helps to bring this about.

5. Interferences with Open Throat and Faults to watch in Inhalation
    a. Inhaling Faults
        i. No gasping; relax, take your time; practice inhalation through mouth and nose.
        ii. No upper chest and shoulder motion; do hissing and attacks to correct.
        iii. Do not drop chest on initial attack; hissing.
        iv. Insufficient sidewise expansion. The ribs cannot be forced out, but is accomplished only by proper intake of breath.
        v. Excessive lower abdominal distention; don't push or press.

    b. Interference with Open Throat
        i. Tense or faulty inhalation – noisy breath, excessive mouth opening.

ii. Stiff tongue, usually a result of tense inhalation and lack of opening.
iii. Stiff jaw, with the same causes of stiff tongue. To correct, vocalize yah with a slack jaw, easy pant, or sigh, adding vowel and then pitch. Let tongue fall forward loosely. Work before a mirror. Remember, a stiff tongue or stiff jaw is a symptom, not a cause, unless there is an unusual physical problem.
iv. Tense lips caused by inadequate breath connection or opening. Let lips fall away from the teeth (loose pout).
v. Tenseness from too stiff and articulation of consonants. Stress long, forward vowels, thinking consonants in line and on the level of vowels, going from consonant to vowel. Think of consonant as a propelling agent, an impetus toward vowel.
vi. Never take in excessive air – no over-breathing. Both cause severe tension.
vii. No excessive mouth opening or spreading. Mouth opening is not always an indication of an open throat. It is the space inside (throat, soft palate) which counts. Mouth opening depends on the individual, voice type, range, dynamics, volume, etc.

c. Breathing Exercises – Singers should spend at least five minutes before the initial practice session on breathing exercises without phonation. Exercises should be done daily to attain elasticity (energy, strength without rigidity), to strengthen muscles and establish a feeling of coordination.
i. Short, light or silent pants; short hisses, kicking in – the "technical attack." The purpose is to strengthen diaphragmatic action and abdominal muscles and to increase awareness of the inspiration to sing.
ii. Slow inhalation through nose to count of 5, exhale to count of 10.
iii. Slow inhalation through mouth to count of 5, exhale to count of 10.
iv. Quick but relaxed inhalation through mouth, exhale slowly.
v. Quick but relaxed inhalation through nose, exhale slowly.
vi. Lie down on floor, raise legs, take deep breath, slowly lowering the legs while hissing.
vii. To increase awareness of back expansion, lean over with loose arms; then inhale. Stand against wall, then inhale.
viii. Count aloud as far as possible at moderate rate of speed after slow inhalation.
ix. Short "belt" hisses, going out below ribcage, at waistline.

6. Vocal Apparatus
a. Larynx – the "voice box" where sound is produced.
b. Vocal folds – the vibrator. Commonly known as the vocal cords, which is a misnomer, as they are actually vocal folds – white flat bands overlying the thyroarytenoid muscle. They are elastic tissue.

Vibration is brought about by the pressure of air from below; air presses folds apart. Length and thickness determines pitch and vibration rate; volume by amount of opening and closing; folds must be brought together smoothly on attack without clicking (the glottal stroke).

c. Resonators – space above folds.
    i. Larynx space – no sensation.
    ii. Pharynx – back of mouth and nose; also called the nasopharynx and oropharynx, the space above the larynx. This with larynx space constitutes the "open throat." The nasopharynx plays a major role in sensations of open-throatedness.
    iii. Mouth cavity – combines with above.
    iv. Head cavities – strong sensation of vibration here in well-produced, focused, resonant tone.
    v. Chest – sympathetic vibrations are felt here on low tones and men's lower voices. The chest is not a resonator; what is felt are sympathetic vibrations in the upper bronchial region.

    Breath should be thought of as energy, not weight. Don't force tone into resonators.

    Placement is not something you do but the result of coordination and balance of resonating space, breath and vowel. Voice is a wind instrument and everyone has his own sounding board. Resonance is sound vibrating in a partially enclosed space.

7. The Attack: The Onset of Tone

The beginning of phonation, the first emission of tone. Proper attack or onset is the result of balance and coordination of breath with the larynx. It is the beginning of the "hook-up", of breath connection with the vowel. For proper first attack, relaxed inhalation must commence with relaxed throat opening; then release breath into pure, focused vowel. If necessary, sigh or use imaginary *h*. Use the technical attack; for some singers, humming is very effective. Speak the vowel first, then add pitch. "Toss" the vowel for spontaneous breath release. Remember, a breathy tone is not a connected one.

Think of the tone as an extension of inhalation. The breath is never held – it always moves from vowel to vowel, from note to note, until you cease singing. There must always be a feeling of movement, flow and spontaneity. Holding breath is not breath control. One maintains a singing position but does not hold breath.

Breath connection and breath control are major contributors to a free, floating tone. The "hook up" with breath and vowel must be mastered. Breath connection is breath resistance, breath compression, which is developed by proper balance between the breath and vowel within proper space. Vowels are carried on a concentrated stream or flow of air.

Good breathing is not necessarily good singing as much more is involved, but it is the first step in acquiring or mastering balanced muscle equilibrium. Too much thought about inhaling and breath often results in tension and unnaturalness. When properly done, it becomes automatic. The more you are on

your breath, the less you are aware of it.

8. Proper Warm-up: Sequence of Vocalises
   Understand the intent of the vocalize. Why are you doing it? What is it meant to accomplish?
   a. Classification of Vocalises
      i. Breathing exercises without phonation.
      ii. Easy warm-up vocalizes; warm up middle range first.
      iii. Flexibility exercises, scale variations.
      iv. Moving exercises for range (arpeggios, etc.).
      v. Semi-sustained vocalizes (long 3rd, 10th, etc.).
      vi. Any special problem vocalizes: passaggio, vowel equalization, etc.
      vii. Sustaining, leaps, wider range exercises for sustained high notes.
      viii. Combination of exercises.

9. Vocal Goals
   a. Ease in posture and inhaling, feeling security and vitality without force or rigidity.
   b. Freedom upon inhaling must prevail while singing; nothing must be in the way of muscular freedom.
   c. Feeling of breath "under the voice," of singing with a connection between breath and vowel, of singing "on your breath," a feeling that the vowel and breath are one.
   d. Direction of vowel toward resonators. Resonance does not come by forcing tone into resonators; it comes through balance of space, breath and vowel.
   e. Feeling that the throat does not close off as vowels change. The goal is to feel everything out of the way, of non-interference.
   f. Everything in singing is in proper balance and equilibrium. The principles of singing are simple but with many variations in the learning process.
   g. Breath plus space plus vowel equal resonance and freedom.